

# Want to Energize Young Voters? Look Beyond Elections

Sobel Aziz Ngom (Courtesy photo)



In the run-up to Senegal's 2012 elections, Sobel Aziz Ngom and his friends [mounted a voter education campaign](#) that combined social media, print, television and one-on-one outreach. For all the positive effect the campaign had, Ngom came away thinking he had defined the problem he was trying to solve too narrowly.

"The main challenge," Ngom said, "is not how to mobilize youth to vote, but how to make them citizens first." While most of the people he is working to reach were born into citizenship, Ngom sees true citizenship as something different: "Citizenship is something you build and cultivate." Ngom says what matters even more than whether or not youth vote is why they vote. "Most of them are voting because people give them T-shirts or money or promise them things. They don't really understand all the implications of a vote." The main challenge today, he believes, is to activate this sense of citizenship. Being a citizen, he said, "is not just voting every five years — it's more than that. If you want to understand the issues of your country, you have to be more engaged in your local community and public affairs."

Ngom thinks social media offers an important opportunity for candidates and leaders to communicate with youth. He just wishes they used it better. "They don't understand the 'social' in 'social media,'" he said. "They're just announcing information, and you never know if they even read the comments." Recently, he met with a government minister to encourage him to take advantage of social media. "Many people are doing good work that aligns with your policies," he reported telling the official. "You have to know who they are and how to interact with them."

In Senegal, Ngom believes, young people's ability to understand the importance of their vote and the duties of citizenship is undercut by too little knowledge of their own nation's history. "In school, what we learn in class is the Cold War and the World War II," he said. "We learn three or four African heroes from 200 years ago, but we don't know where we are coming from in the last century. It's hard to build your citizenship or have a feeling of belonging if you don't know what you belong to."

Take the YALI Network Online Course "[Understanding Elections and Civic Responsibility](#)" to learn, among other things, what your vote means and the responsibilities that come with it.

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